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Between Silence and Selfhood: The Feminine Voice and Consciousness in *To the Lighthouse*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: June 21, 2026 Revised: July 04, 2026 Accepted: July 19, 2026 Available Online: August 03, 2026 Keywords: <i>To the Lighthouse</i>; Virginia Woolf; selfhood; silence; consciousness; feminist criticism; Mrs. Ramsay; Lily Briscoe Corresponding author: Muhammad Yousaf Khan Email: usafmarwat@gmail.com	This paper examines the women characters' struggle in Virginia Woolf's <i>To the Lighthouse</i> against the socially imposed silence and their quest for selfhood within an obstructive social environment. The novel depicts the mundane life of the Ramsay household. It shows how women are silenced in a patriarchal society and how it curbs the likelihoods of women to grow and assert their identity. Employing close reading and feminist criticism, the research examines the outer actions and inner thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. It digs into the narrative space which Woolf creates for the hitherto blocked female voices through her stream of consciousness techniques. The findings show that Mrs. Ramsay's emotional labour suppresses her emotions and feelings creating the inner struggles and conflicts which ultimately distorts her identity and selfhood. The study also showcases that Lily Briscoe strives to create and assert her unique selfhood through her painting. She fights patriarchal standards in the face of her internal indecision and societal censure. The paper suggest that future investigations may study silence as a psychological disorder, and scrutinize female creativity and thoughts in other modernist works as their unique methods of resistance.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) remains a central text in modernist and feminist literary studies. The novel unfolds through the consciousness of its characters rather than through external action. Woolf uses this technique to expose the inner lives of women who are otherwise silenced by domestic duty and social convention. Mrs. Ramsay embodies the Victorian ideal of feminine self-sacrifice, while Lily Briscoe resists that ideal through her art. Both women navigate a patriarchal household that limits their voice and their sense of self.

In this novel, there is a struggle between two extremes: external silence and internal self. Mrs. Ramsay rarely speaks her mind. Here, the author utilizes the technique of stream of consciousness to portray the consciousness of the protagonist herself. One notable moment in this novel is when Mrs. Ramsay withdraws herself into a state of complete interiority from her social facade.

This is what, according to her, is “a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others” (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 62). In this situation, the essence of Mrs. Ramsay is revealed beneath her domestic character. This is an area beyond the reach of language. Lily Briscoe faces a similar struggle. She wishes to paint. Society tells her that women cannot paint or write (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 48). Her canvas is her means of resistance. It is the location where her voice that was not heard anywhere else is created.

Feminist criticism has long been focused on Woolf’s portrayal of gender and voice. Showalter (1977) charts a female literary tradition from mimicry to protest to self-discovery. She puts Woolf in the last, “feminine” stage of this tradition. Abel (1989) reads *To the Lighthouse* in a psychoanalytical way. She is curious about the development of identity in the novel through the maternal and paternal influences. Zwerdling (1986) locates Woolf’s fiction within the social and political context. He believes that Woolf’s personal female consciousness cannot be separated from the public patriarchal structures.

These studies shed light on Woolf’s feminism and her narrative style. However, a specific gap remains. There are few studies that directly compare Mrs. Ramsay’s silence with Lily Briscoe’s creative resistance as two modalities of resistance to the same pressure from the patriarchy. Current criticism generally addresses each woman individually. It is rare that it follows the way in which Woolf’s stream of consciousness technique allows for both forms of resistance to coexist within the narrative. This paper addresses that gap.

This paper argues that Woolf constructs a narrative space for female consciousness that resists patriarchal silencing. The inner life of Mrs. Ramsay reflects repressed emotional labour. Lily Briscoe’s inner life suggests creative resistance through art. In unison, the inner lives of these two women can be seen as two routes towards selfhood in one constrained family. This paper employs close reading and feminist approaches to explore the inner lives of both these characters drawing directly on the text of the novel and on established critique on Virginia Woolf.

Literature Review

Scholarship on *To the Lighthouse* has long focused on Woolf’s feminism and her narrative technique. Early studies, such as Showalter (1977), placed Woolf within a broader female literary tradition. Showalter described this tradition as moving through three phases: imitation, protest, and self-discovery. She located Woolf in the final, “female” phase, marked by a search for authentic female expression. This framework remains useful for understanding both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Mrs. Ramsay represents an older, more imitative model of femininity. Lily represents the newer, self-discovering model.

Zwerdling’s (1986) extension of this feminist interpretation into the socio-political sphere involved arguing that Woolf’s private, inner spaces could not be separated from the public, patriarchal spheres surrounding them. According to Zwerling, Mrs. Ramsay’s domestic silence is not simply a private issue. It is a reflection of a broader social system which assigns women to unpaid emotional labour. E. Abel (1989) provided a psychoanalytical explanation of the same phenomenon. She studied the novel from a Freudian and Kleinian perspective. Abel claimed that Lily’s painting is a replacement for the absence of a maternal relationship. Her brush is a means to processing unmet emotional needs.

These readings have been enriched and sharpened by more recent scholarship. In Rutledge (2020), the “feminine spaces” created by Woolf around Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are explored. Rutledge claimed that Woolf assigns each woman a unique spatial and psychological space. The dinner table and the window are the places that Mrs. Ramsay occupies. The edge of the garden and the canvas are Lily’s space. These areas allow each woman to live in part outside of the influence of the male, even though she lives within the same household. This spatial reading reinforces the present paper’s argument that Woolf constructs a space of resistance, a space other than a thematic one.

Muhsin (2021) narrowed his focus down to Lily Briscoe. Muhsin contended that Lily’s emotional and visionary experiences directly influence her artistic decisions. Her hesitation in front of the canvas is not a weakness. It is a process of working through the buried feeling. Muhsin’s reading reinforces the notion that Lily’s art is a form of resistance, not a form of flight. Jenkins (2023) studied the same two characters by means of manuscript study. She studied Woolf’s initial drafts of *To the Lighthouse*. She discovered Woolf had edited the scenes of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily in order to enhance their feminist aesthetic impact. This manuscript evidence confirms that Woolf’s decisions regarding silence and voice were intentional. They were no coincidences of fashion.

The theory of narrative has also contributed to the comprehension of the construction of interior voice in Woolf. Guan (2023) applied feminist narratology to the novel. Guan noted that Woolf employs free indirect discourse and internal focalization to provide female characters with a voice in the narration. The narrator's voice is not a dominant voice, it is usually quiet. Instead, the story is told from the point of view of each character. This technique is used to allow the woman's thoughts to be the focal point without any overt statement from the author. Guan's argument supports a central claim of this paper. Woolf's stream of consciousness technique itself becomes a feminist tool. It allows women access in the interior where social convention would prevent them from speaking.

Grisot et al. (2020) examined the reactions of real readers to Woolf's experimental methods. They studied the reader's responses to *To the Lighthouse* and Mrs. Dalloway. They noted that readers find it difficult to separate what the narrator describes and what the characters think. This is not a shortcoming but rather a blurring. It was how Woolf depicted the unvoiced and silent inner life. This discovery is very important for the discussion in this paper since it proves that the language of Woolf allows for obscurity and the coming up of thoughts that are not explicitly articulated in the text.

The research of Williams (2023) enriched the technical analysis with the psychological aspect. For her, this novel was the reconstruction of the internal parental figures and forces of the psyche. Therefore, Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay are not just characters but also an expression of the inner life of the mind itself. This approach introduced another element in the discussion of the silence of Mrs. Ramsay. The feeling that she suppresses is not only social but also interior that has never achieved resolution.

The novel is still being explored in new directions by recent scholarship. *To the Lighthouse* is interpreted by Umar et al. (2025) in the light of New Liberal political theory. They argue that Woolf is not only changing the definition of domestic space as a space of repression but also a space of ethical development. The reading evokes a complex reading of the house of Mrs. Ramsay as a place of pure imprisonment. It suggests that the same home setting can serve as a place of moral and personal transformation. Gibson (2026) has a different textual and archival approach. He finds that Woolf's treatment of the lost brooch that Minta loses in the novel has echoes of Bram Stoker's fiction. This connection places Woolf's small material details in the context of older literary concerns of female loss, courtship and possession. Gibson's finding demonstrates that even the smallest of objects in the novel still provide new gendered interpretations when studied carefully.

The scholarship in Woolf's modernist technique goes beyond *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Dalloway was explored by Khan and Khattak (2022) in the context of mental health, gender and narrative innovation. They maintained that the stream of consciousness technique revealed an inner turmoil that would not otherwise be revealed by social convention. Their reading of Clarissa Dalloway's inner life is similar to Mrs. Ramsay's repressed emotional life in *To the Lighthouse*. The same pattern of inner conflict can be seen in related work by modernist women's writing outside Woolf. Fatima et al. (2026) examined Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" using the theories of de Beauvoir and Cixous. They demonstrated a silent female voice that moves towards linguistic revolution against the control of men. *The Bell Jar* was analysed using cognitive stylistics by Bisma and Khan (2026). They discovered that identity fragmentation is not only a theme, but also a measurable pattern in sentence structure and word selection. In both studies, the modernist and mid-century women writers repeatedly enact the same conflict as Woolf does in *To the Lighthouse*: a conflict between imposed silence and an insistent, yet often broken, inner voice.

Taken together, this body of scholarship confirms four things. First, Woolf's feminism operates through both theme and technique. Second, the themes of silence and creative resistance are already well established in Woolf scholarship, along with the more recent interpretations that incorporate political theory and literary influence. Third, the motif of silence and voice recurs in many modernist and midcentury writings by women, including but not limited to Virginia Woolf. Fourth, most scholarly treatments of the issue consider Mrs. Ramsay's silence and Lily's painting separately or integrate them into larger discussions about narrative and social space, narratology, psychoanalysis, or source-textuality. Only a few works position these two women in directly in apposition as two different responses to the same patriarchal pressure. This paper develops on the technical and psychological knowledge stated above. It combines the two into a concentrated comparative reading of silence and selfhood within one family.

Methodology

In this paper, close reading and feminist literary criticism is used. In this way, a careful attention is paid to Woolf's language, imagery, and narrative techniques. Feminism provides the critical framework for understanding the gender relations in the novel's text. The primary source of the study is Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927/1981). The analysis is focused on the two characters: Mrs.

Ramsay and Lily Briscoe and their external actions and internal experiences, represented by the author's stream-of-consciousness method. Direct quotations from the novel are used as supporting examples. The secondary sources are feminist and psychoanalytic criticism, narrative theory, and recent Woolf scholarship. These sources are used for the contextualization and interpretation of the textual analysis within the frame of Showalter's (1977) general concept of female literary development.

Results and Discussions

Mrs. Ramsay's silence makes its first appearance quite early in the novel, in the form of a silent withdrawal. Watching Mrs. Ramsay from across the room, William Bankes notices how she withdraws into silence. She feels herself "being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 62). This imagery establishes the terms for all the discussion to come. The deepest part of Mrs. Ramsay's identity is not located in her social identity as wife and hostess; rather, it lies only in silence, hidden even from those who know her best. According to Zwerdling (1986), this kind of silent withdrawal is characteristic of all Woolf's female characters. They withdraw inside themselves because there is no space for them outside of the household. The text provides evidence for this interpretation. The interior world of Mrs. Ramsay is known only to the reader, not to the characters who surround her.

Mrs. Ramsay's views on gender support this suppression. She has a very narrow definition of marriage and womanhood. She says to herself, "an unmarried woman... has missed the best of life" (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 49). It is this that drives her match making efforts. It also reveals the degree of her internalization of patriarchy. She does not just follow a patriarchal system. She reproduces it, even though she is subjected to the emotional demands of it. In her dual roles of both victim and punisher, Mrs. Ramsay's character is quite complex. According to Abel (1989), her affection is simply a way of covering up her personal emotional needs. This is evident in the text, since Mrs. Ramsay always sympathizes with "men always as if they lacked something" but never with women "as if they had something" (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 85). This sentence conveys her personal opinion about the strength of a woman though she is publicly submitting to the strength of a man. This implies that her silence is not a form of weakness, but strength. It is a confidence that she does not openly state but feels in her heart.

Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party scene demonstrates the productive aspect of her silence. While everyone is eating, she feels a certain sense of camaraderie descending over the table. She believes that "there is a coherence in things, a stability; something... is immune from change" (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 105). This moment indicates Mrs. Ramsay's making meaning without words. She creates a sense of community by gesture, timing and presence rather than by speech. This is a nonverbal power, which makes a mere negative interpretation of her silence difficult. The same is argued by Umar et al. (2025). They claim that domestic space in the novel is not only repressive. It can be a place of change in ethics and emotions as well. The claim is supported by Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party. Her silence creates authentic relationship with people who could otherwise be alone. However, that power is only temporary. Woolf depicts the moment as fragile and about to lose itself. Mrs. Ramsay's creative authority is never permanent or popular. It shimmers in the midst of the dinner party, and it goes out.

Likewise, Lily Briscoe faces a different kind of pressure, a much more open one. It is a pressure that is openly exerted on her by Charles Tansley. He tells her that "Women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 48). This attack is verbal, unlike Mrs. Ramsay's silence. Lily hears the very thing that is holding her back. But Woolf demonstrates that Lily does not entirely agree with this assessment. She goes on painting throughout the novel, despite question and discouragement from others. The persistence is helpful in supporting Muhsin's reading (2021). According to Muhsin, Lily's initial reluctance towards the canvas is not a weakness. It is a process of uncovering and not giving in to the underlying feeling. This is supported by the evidence in the text. Lily continues to return to her canvas throughout the scenes, despite Tansley's comment.

This reading is further reinforced by Lily's resistance to marriage. During the dinner party, she mentions Paul and Minta's engagement. She concludes, privately, that "she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution" (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 102). This is an important passage because of two reasons. First, it demonstrates Lily's rejection of Mrs. Ramsay's fundamental belief in marriage and women's fulfillment. Secondly, it relates to Gibson's (2026) recent research on the novel's brooch imagery. In his analysis of Woolf's novels, Gibson explores the symbolic meaning of the missing brooch and its implications for anxieties about the possession and courtship of women. Lily's thoughts are in the very moment that Minta loses her grandmother's brooch. In this scene marriage is associated with loss and vulnerability. From this perspective, Lily's reluctance to talk about marriage is an attempt to avoid the same fate. Her art is an ownership and control that is not available through marriage, according to Woolf's framing.

In the novel's final scene, Lily's coming to selfhood is revealed. She has completed her painting and Woolf exclaims, "It was done; it was finished. Yes... I have had my vision" (Woolf, 1927/1981, p. 209). This line is the most apparent evidence in the text. Mrs. Ramsay is never quite aware of it, but Lily discovers an active, self-written voice for her inner truth. This is supported by manuscript evidence, as Jenkins (2023) argues. She shows how Woolf edited the very last scene of Lily to make it more feminist. The last line was no coincidence. It is intentional and deliberate art. This is further supported by Guan's (2023) narratological argument. Guan demonstrates how Woolf empowers Lily with a narrative voice by means of internal focalization. The reader is directly immersed in Lily's vision without interruption. This way Lily's quiet and private accomplishment is made public and permanently recorded, but Mrs. Ramsay's fleeting dinner party moment is not recorded in that way.

A pattern emerges when the two women are compared. Mrs. Ramsay's silence is a part of the social roles. It gives a glimpse of real power, as in the dinner party, but it is a transient and unrehearsed one. Part of Lily's resistance is outside of these roles. Her canvas becomes her life's record, a document that never ends, her inner vision's record. This distinction is brought to light by Rutledge's (2020) conception of "feminine spaces." The table and window is Mrs. Ramsay's space, it's a temporary, social space. The canvas is a strong and one-of-a-kind space where Lily draws. Both women have a narrative life for Woolf, but only Lily's resistance creates something that lasts beyond the moment of its creation.

This is also evident in other contemporary and mid-century modernist writing on women who are silenced. A similar phenomenon is discussed in Mrs. Dalloway by Khan and Khattak (2022). They demonstrate that the inner turmoil of Clarissa Dalloway is hidden behind her veneer of social grace, as is Mrs. Ramsay's. A similar, but more explosive trajectory can be traced in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" as described by Fatima et al. (2026). In that place, a quiet female voice finally breaks out into a loud verbal protest. Bisma and Khan (2026) claim that *The Bell Jar* is a novel in which the identity of Esther Greenwood is split, and this is manifested in the very syntax of her narration. All these studies show a variety of responses to patriarchy's silencing. Mrs. Ramsay is close to one end of this spectrum, trapped, unresolved. In "Daddy", Plath's speaker is challenging, on the other side. Lily Briscoe is in the middle. Her resistance is unspoken but it produces an accomplished product that is external: the painting itself.

This finding addresses the gap identified earlier in this paper. Existing scholarship tends to treat Mrs. Ramsay and Lily separately, or folds both into broader arguments about space, narratology, or psychoanalysis. The results here show that reading them together, side by side, clarifies something neither reading alone fully captures. Woolf does not offer one single model of female resistance. She offers two, operating at different intensities and with different outcomes, within one shared household. Grisot et al. (2020) research on reader response supports why this comparison matters. Real readers often struggle to separate narrator commentary from character thought in Woolf's prose. This blurring is precisely what allows both Mrs. Ramsay's silence and Lily's resistance to surface, side by side, without direct authorial announcement. The technique itself becomes the shared foundation for both women's, otherwise very different, journeys toward selfhood.

Conclusion

This paper examined silence and selfhood in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay's silence reflects patriarchal constraint, yet it also creates fragile moments of relational power. Lily Briscoe's resistance takes a more active form. Her painting becomes a lasting, self-authored expression of identity. Together, these two women reveal that Woolf offers no single model of female resistance. She offers a spectrum, ranging from contained silence to creative assertion. Woolf's stream of consciousness technique makes both forms of resistance visible to the reader, even where social convention denies women direct speech. This comparative reading fills a gap in existing scholarship, which often treats Mrs. Ramsay and Lily separately rather than as parallel responses to shared patriarchal pressure.

Recommendations

Future research could treat silence as a psychological, not only social, condition. Scholars might also compare female creativity across other modernist writers, such as Woolf, Plath, and their contemporaries. Comparative studies could clarify how silenced women in different texts move toward selfhood through varied creative and linguistic strategies.

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